



*Office of Public Affairs
U.S. Embassy, Wellington*

Pacific Region of Vital Importance to the United States

By Ambassador William P. McCormick

In the Oval Office recently President Bush acknowledged how much the U.S. relies on New Zealand's expertise and leadership to help solve the problems of the Pacific.

The U.S. will continue to rely on New Zealand's expertise and we recognize that we have much to learn from the way New Zealand engages with Polynesia.

We also acknowledge that the U.S. could be doing more to help out. We recognise that N.Z. and the U.S. each have different resources available and when we work together we use our respective strengths to advance common goals. We are committed to working harder to augment New Zealand's efforts, and the efforts of other partners, to encourage prosperity, good governance, and the rule of law in the Pacific.

To that end, later this week, leaders from around the Pacific will gather in Washington D.C. for the Eighth Pacific Island Conference of Leaders. This special gathering of Pacific leaders takes place every three years under the auspices of the Honolulu-based East-West Center and provides the leaders with a forum to discuss the opportunities and challenges facing the region. This year, for the first time, the Conference will be held in Washington D.C. and the US State Department is delighted to be working with the East-West Center to make this event a tremendous success.

This meeting of the Pacific Island Conference of Leaders will mark a milestone in what the U.S. Government has dubbed the "Year of the Pacific"; a focused effort by the United States to expand our engagement with the countries of the vast and important Pacific region.

Secretary of State Rice will meet with Pacific Island leaders to discuss how we can work together to promote closer political, economic, and cultural ties.

The Conference will also provide a forum for senior U.S. Government officials from the Departments of State, Defense, Interior, Commerce, USAID, and the U.S. Trade Representative's office to discuss regional and global issues with the region's leaders and hear directly about their interests and concerns.

Among the attendees at the Conference will be the governors of Hawaii and the three U.S. Pacific territories, Guam, American Samoa and the Northern Marianas, underlining the fact that the United States is truly a Pacific Nation. We also have long-term ties through our former trusteeship relations -- and now Compacts of Free Association -- with the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and Palau. President Note of the Republic of the Marshall Islands is co-chair of this special Conference.

The United States' ties with the independent countries of the South Pacific go back centuries, to the days of the Nantucket whaling boats that sought safe harbor in Fiji and Tonga. Those relationships continued through the island campaigns of the Second World War. As the countries of the Pacific became independent between 1962 and 1994, we established formal diplomatic relations with each of them and then welcomed them as members of the United Nations.

The United States cares deeply about the safety and stability of this vast and strategic region. Many countries in the region face growing political, environmental and economic challenges, compounded by longer-term transnational threats. In response to these threats, the United States is working to promote prosperity, good governance, and the rule of law in the region. We are reaching out to the people of Fiji and supporting the efforts of Fiji's Pacific Island neighbours to help that troubled nation quickly return to democracy. It is in no one's interests for the Pacific to become an area where strongmen arbitrarily decide the fates of their countries and weaken the democratic underpinnings of Pacific societies.

Reflecting U.S. determination to play a constructive and active role in this vital region, next week the U.S. will also host a meeting in Washington of the many countries with strong interests in the Pacific, including New Zealand, China, France, Germany, Korea, and Japan. These "Pacific Core Partners" will discuss and, we hope, endorse a set of donor principles calling for transparency, responsibility, and accountability. We will discuss the importance of good governance and the rule of law in the region and how to help Fiji return to democracy. The Conference of Leaders and the Core Partners meetings will be linked in a celebration of the region's culture at the annual "Pacific Night" reception for Washington's diplomatic corps, senior U.S. Government officials, and others with an interest in Oceania. "Pacific Night" will be co-sponsored by the New Zealand Embassy in Washington and other partners.

We look forward to working hand-in-hand with the leaders and peoples of the Pacific Island nations and their partners both in the region and around the world to face our shared challenges and, together, endeavour to solve them.